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News Release

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Corps focuses on increasing fish survival in Columbia/Snake

Portland, Ore. - - Despite drought conditions and regional power emergencies, fish on their way to the Pacific Ocean this year will benefit from special river operations and physical improvements at U.S. Army Corps of Engineers projects in the Columbia River basin.

A greater percentage of fish will be collected this year at Snake River dams, transported by barge, and released below Bonneville Dam to increase survival rates during an exceptionally poor flow year said Jim Athearn, a fish biologist in the Corps' Northwestern Division headquarters.

The Corps is planning to modify its routines and operate facilities at McNary Dam to minimize the effects of warm summer water temperatures in the Columbia River and use additional releases from Dworshak Dam near Orofino, Idaho, to cool the Snake River and increase flows. Navigation lockages for recreational craft at Columbia and Snake river mainstem dams will be limited and irrigation schedules at Corps recreational and wildlife areas adjusted to further decrease water consumption.

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2-2-2 Fish Passage

The water supply forecast and low-flow conditions for the Pacific Northwest this year are similar to those of 1977, the lowest water year on record since 1929. Today, the demands on the region's most precious resource – water - are even greater because of the Endangered Species Act, thirsty industry, population growth and power needs.

"With little water available for spring spill and flows well below those specified in the National Marine Fisheries Service Biological Opinion, transporting fish is an important tool for critical situations like these, just as it was under similar conditions in 1977," said Athearn. Historical NMFS reports labeled the survival of in-river juvenile migrants as "virtually nil" in 1977, crediting nearly all adult fish returns from that year to the Corps juvenile fish transportation program.

Barging from the Corps' Snake River projects begins April 8, with up to eight barges transporting between 70 and 90 percent of juvenile fish this year.

Current forecasts, based on an abnormally low snow-pack and below-average precipitation, project flows to be as low as 33,000 cubic feet per second (cfs) for April, significantly less than the NMFS Biological Opinion spring flow objectives of 85,000 cfs to 1000,000 cfs. While summer flow objectives in the Snake are 50,000 cfs to 55,000 cfs for July and August, preliminary data suggests flows may barely reach 23,000 cfs.

Athearn anticipates a special permit from NMFS will allow some endangered salmon from the middle and upper Columbia region to be transported this spring from McNary Dam near Umatilla, Ore., located downstream from the confluence of the Columbia and Snake rivers.

3-3-3 Fish Passage

In average water years, barging from McNary Dam occurs only during the summer months when flows fall off and water temperatures increase, but it is needed this spring to reduce in-river mortality and give more flexibility to fish conservation efforts. Spring and summer flows at McNary Dam may be as low as 105,000 cfs this year, well below Biological Opinion minimum flow targets of 220,000 cfs to 260,000 cfs for spring and 200,000 cfs for summer.

Many of the recent physical improvements made to Corps dams will provide additional benefit to juvenile fish migrating downstream and adults returning upstream. A new downstream outfall at Bonneville Dam ensures that young fish are released into faster water, making them less likely to fall victim to predators. Changes to juvenile bypass systems at the dam account for a 6 percent to 13 percent increase in survival. Testing of new minimum gap runner turbines shows an increase in survival of up to 4 percent, which means survival rates with MGRs could range from 93 percent to 98 percent.

Special efforts will be made at all Corps projects to assure that fish passage facilities – turbine intake guidance screens, powerhouse bypass systems and fish ladders – are operating at optimum efficiency. Because of numerous improvements to the bypass systems in the last two decades, the Corps expects substantially higher survival rates over those of 1977.

“This is an unprecedented situation,” said Col. Eric T. Mogren, deputy commander, Northwestern Division. “Never before have so many demands and constraints been visited on the Columbia River system. It is more important than ever that the region commit to working together to meet the competing needs of multiple users.”

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